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NEW NKU HEAD COACH JOHN BRANNEN'S TEAM LOOKS ALMOST OUT OF CONTROL. AND THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT HE WANTS YOU TO SEE. // BY RYAN CLARK

OF CHAOS

THE NEW COACH IS FRUSTRATED.

He slaps his hands and the noise echoes off the empty arena seats. He has a few choice words for his point guard. But this isn't a moment of anger; this is a teaching moment.

Then again, there are a lot of teaching moments, the New Coach says. This particular moment occurred on a sweltering, 90-degree day in July, when the NKU basketball squad was only able to practice a few days a week, and the learning curve seemed higher than the roof of BB&T Arena. The New Coach is introducing his offense. The players are learning a new system and new vocabulary, and incorporating new teammates and preparing for their debut season in a new conference.

Everything, it seems, is new. And—at this moment—quiet. “Listen to me!” the New Coach shouts. “When I don't say a

word, it gets really quiet in here. We've got to talk!”

It will be a while before this team is “94 feet, both ways,” as the coaches call their style of play—a frenetic but controlled attack on both the offensive and defensive ends.

But in those moments, the earliest practices when the team is learning—when they are reversing the ball quickly, fighting through screens instead of taking the easy way out, when they are communicating with each other on defense—things come together well. The team begins clapping for one another as they see the potential of what could be.

It looks like organized chaos.

When the players force a turnover on defense during a scrimmage they scream in excitement.

The New Coach smiles. 94 feet. Both ways.

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NORTHERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY'S new head men's basketball coach is a teacher wrapped in a basketball player's body. At 41, John Brannen still looks like a baller: 6-foot-7, trim, clean-cut with an easy smile.

"This is the fun stuff," he says, showing that smile as he walks over after practice. "Being out on the court—this is what it's all about."

This early practice in July went for a little more than an hour, and in some cases it wasn't pretty. One fast break drill produced six turnovers in three minutes. But that wasn't the point, Brannen says. The point at that particular moment was to learn.

"Now, if you see us doing these same things in a few months, you're going to see a different side of me as a coach," he says. "But all of this now is about giving them information."

At a public event on April 7, NKU named Brannen the University's fifth head men's basketball coach, taking over for Dave Bezold. "Our program promises to bring great pride to the NKU community, and we will strive for success on and off the court," Brannen told the crowd of about 400 that day. "I can't wait to start working and return home to embark on my head coaching career."

Brannen's playing career began just down the road from NKU at Newport Central Catholic High School. But the married father of two young daughters emphasizes that NKU is special for more than just proximity.

"This was the right job for me," he says. "Yes, it's nice that I grew up here. But when I came here and I was able to see the facilities, able to meet the administrators and the president, I saw that this was a place that was ready to compete. I knew this was the right job."

Coming home is just the icing on the cake.

Each day in the summer while growing up, Brannen and his brother Grant would get up early and head to a mandatory, self-regulated practice.

"There's six years difference between us, so he's about 17 and I was about 11, and we'd wake up at 6 a.m.," says Grant, a former player who now coaches the men's varsity team at Walton-Verona High School. "I didn't want to be up, but he's my babysitter at the time, so I go where he goes. And we'd eat breakfast and then we'd go to the gym."

Grant says his older brother would shoot 300 jumpers—and Grant would have to rebound. "Then we would go get lunch, and he would find a pickup game somewhere," Grant recalls. "And after that, he would go lift. Then we'd go home and I'd have to do chores. And that was my summer."

He has one word for his brother's mentality: "Relentless." "He eats, sleeps and breathes basketball," Grant says.

IN HIGH SCHOOL, JOHN BRANNEN STARRED at Newport Central Catholic, finishing his prep career in 1992 as the school's all-time leading scorer with nearly 1,900 points (in 2007, he would be inducted into the school's Hall of Fame). He started his collegiate career at Morehead State before transferring to play for Coach Billy Donovan at Marshall, and he scored 1,008 points in two seasons—while earning honors as a Rhodes Scholarship finalist as a

"HE EATS, SLEEPS, AND BREATHES BASKETBALL."

—GRANT BRANNEN, JOHN'S BROTHER

senior—before playing two years as a pro in Belgium.

"I always knew I wanted to be a coach," Brannen says. He just needed a chance.

Enter Jayson Gee, now the coach at Longwood University in Virginia. Fifteen years ago, Gee was the head coach at Division II University of Charleston in West Virginia. He provided a job on his staff for Brannen.

"I'd known him from when he was a player in high school, and he sent me a tape," Gee says. "I watched his tape, and I said, 'He's not good enough for my team.' I was wrong then. I ate my words. When I got another chance to take him, this time as an assistant, I did."

Brannen took advantage of his chance. He recruited and coached well, and stops would follow at Eastern Kentucky, St. Bonaventure, and Virginia Commonwealth, where he reunited with former Donovan assistant Anthony Grant. Together, Grant and Brannen helped lead VCU to prominence. In the 2007 NCAA Tournament, the Rams upset sixth-seeded Duke, 79–77. By 2009, the tandem headed to Alabama, and two years later they watched many of their VCU recruits make a surprising run to the Final Four.

"Even as a player he was known as one of the first guys in the gym and one of the last to leave," Grant says. "As an assistant coach I haven't been around anybody that's more thorough, in terms of his willingness to go the extra mile, whether it be from a recruiting standpoint or a coaching standpoint."

Brannen coached at Alabama for six years, and served as associate head coach for two. He worked with perimeter players, and the Crimson Tide had three 20-win seasons during that time. When Grant was let go in 2015, Brannen knew his time in Alabama was over. His thoughts turned to possible head coaching positions. Back in 2004, NKU had an opening, and Brannen was a finalist then.

In 2015, it just so happened NKU was again looking for a head coach.

JOHN BROUGHT WITH HIM ALL OF the qualities we wanted in our new head coach," says NKU Athletic Director Ken Bothof. "He had experience at all levels of college basketball rising from an assistant at mid-major programs to an associate head coach at the highest level at Alabama. He enjoyed success at each of those levels. What made him stand out from all other candidates was his knowledge of Northern Kentucky University, his vision for our program, his commitment to developing young men, both athletically and academically—and the fact that he was coming home to Northern Kentucky."

Brannen didn't take long putting together his staff, hiring David Ragland, Ronald Nored, and Sean Dwyer as assistant coaches and former Norse standout Tony Rack as director of basketball operations.

Ragland was most recently a Bowling Green assistant coach. Nored played for Brad Stevens at Butler and was on the Bulldogs' back-to-back NCAA national runner-up teams in 2010 and 2011. He spent two years with Stevens and the Boston Celtics, where he was a player development assistant. Sean Dwyer was on Alabama's staff with Brannen for four seasons, including two as a special assistant to the head coach.

Rack, who played for NKU from 2008–2012, still ranks third in program history for 3-point field goal percentage (44.3) and ninth in



“WE KNOW THAT TO HAVE SUCCESS, WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND OUR CORE VALUES: TRUST, TOUGHNESS, AND SACRIFICE.” —COACH JOHN BRANNEN



with us. One time, we were sprinting up court, stopping, and taking an entry pass in the post. He wanted us to be physical.” So Coach Brannen took off down the court to show them. “He was not running as fast as us,” Billups recalls, “and I was thinking he wasn’t even going to try it.”

But he did. Brannen sprinted, then stopped in front of Billups. Then Coach tripped. And then he fell. “He just seemed to trip over air,” Jalen laughs. “None of us knew what to do.” Brannen looked up at Jalen. “Come on, J.B.—don’t just stand there,” the Coach said. “Help me up.” “We all just broke up laughing,” Jalen says. “We’re all getting to know each other. And it’s working.”

BILLUPS IS EXCITED ABOUT THE STYLE of play Brannen brings to the table. While it looks chaotic on the court, there is a method to the madness.

“We weren’t used to this type of intensity before,” Billups says. “See, I’m a runner, not a half-court guy, so I think I’m really going to benefit from this. We want to run baseline to baseline, and that style fits me better than any other. From the start I really liked Coach and the way we are doing things.”

Brannen has told several players they need to look no further than his old Virginia Commonwealth teams to see the possibilities of what could be. And the Coach has instant credibility—players know he has a blueprint, that he has helped other programs build themselves up and win.

“It’s constant, up-tempo, in-your-face defense and attacking offense,” says junior guard Dean Danos. “It’s kind of like the way Louisville

plays, too. The crowd will feed off of that and it should be really fun.” Danos, who is nursing his left knee back to health after having microfracture surgery in May, says the transition has been as smooth as it could have been. He expects to be back in playing shape by the start of the season.

“I’m beyond excited—kind of consumed by it, actually,” Danos says. “We’re adjusting to each other, but all of our guys are open to learning a new system. They’re buying in. With communication and trust you get better every day.”

NKU, which returns 12 players this year, signed Brannen to a four-year contract, which will take the Norse through their third NCAA tournament-eligible season in Division I. The 2015–16 season will be NKU’s fourth and final reclassification season after making the jump from Division II.

The players and coaches know it will be a long road to success. But they also know to trust their new man.

“There’s nothing he won’t be prepared for,” Grant says. “He’d handled scheduling, player development, scouting—every facet of a college program. Northern Kentucky got a gem.”

FAST-FORWARD TO THE MIDDLE of an unusually hot September day, and Brannen is yelling at his team as they go through a sluggish practice. They’ve just had two consecutive days off—something that rarely happens—and he thinks it isn’t good for them. Billups has led a spirited round of lifting, and gets a pat on the back from his coach. Other players don’t fare as well. One gets thrown out of practice.

Danos is back on the court, able to run, but still unable to participate in contact drills. It’s his first day back, and he’s progressing right on schedule, he says. He’ll be ready to go all-out in October.

The team, as a whole, has progressed too, Brannen says. They’ve gotten in shape. They’ve learned to communicate better on the court. They are learning about angles and screens and the coaches actually bring out a rope to show the straight line between them and the opposing team’s basketball. It’s always about defense: 94 feet. Both ways.

At one point, Brannen stops practice, and tells his team about effort. “The job of a coach is to get you to do what you don’t want to do, so you can achieve what you want to achieve,” he says.

Brannen says the team has gotten better over the summer at giving a consistent effort, understanding how hard they need to play every day, and understanding how important it is to defend.

“We have progressed well,” Brannen says. “We know that to have success, we need to understand our core values: trust, toughness, and sacrifice. We need to have a defensive mindset, and we need to handle adverse situations. This team already cares for each other. If we can do the other things, we’ll be fine.”

How it all translates to wins and losses is not something Brannen can gauge. But he has seen it all before. He knows what it takes to build a program.

“This doesn’t surprise me—I absolutely thought (Brannen would) be a head coach,” says Gee, his old boss. “He’s got a motor; he’s just a tireless worker and a natural leader of men. I will tell you one thing: It’s going to happen there. It’s just a matter of time. You don’t allow the present-day circumstances to impact the destiny. It’s a journey, and he’s going to get it done.

“That’s the bottom line.” 🍌



NORSE WOMEN READY TO ELEVATE

THE WOMEN’S BASKETBALL TEAM IS READY TO ELEVATE its game as it faces decidedly tough competition in the Horizon League.

“Every year we have a slogan, and this year it’s ‘Elevate,’” says head coach Dawn Plitzuweit, who is entering her fourth season in charge of the Norse bench. “Our goal is to help our young ladies to elevate themselves as better students, better basketball players, and as strong women of our community in a way that transcends school and transcends basketball.”

Coming off the program’s 32nd consecutive winning season, Plitzuweit and the Norse have entered their final year in the NCAA Division I reclassification process. To help them prepare, the team wrapped up its summer workouts with a trip to Costa Rica, during which they competed against the Costa Rican National Team in a three-game series to sharpen their skills.

With a strong core of returning players, the Norse look to replace the strong post offense provided by Melody Doss and Kaitlyn Gerrety, who combined for almost a third of NKU’s scoring in 2014–15. Stepping up to the task is Rebecca Lyttle, a junior transfer from Michigan who was a powerful force for NKU in the Costa Rica series.

“We have a special group of young ladies and some very versatile players,” added Plitzuweit. “During our trip to Costa Rica we had different players step up in all three games. We will work towards building consistency in our scorers, but the great feature is that we have an equal opportunity offense which allows a lot of flexibility.”

Prominent returners for the Norse in the back court are guards Christine Roush, who averaged 12.5 points and 4.2 rebounds per game, and Rianna Gayheart, whose 3.8 assists per game led the team last year. Also back is Kasey Uetrecht, who led the team by shooting 45 percent from the field, and Kelley Wiegman, who scored six points a game.

The Norse are undertaking a challenging schedule this year that includes 17 home games and features nonconference matchups at BB&T Arena against Marquette, Akron, and Kentucky. In addition, the Norse will play an 18-game Horizon League schedule that will carry the team to the Horizon League Championship, March 10–13 in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

“The game plan is to put together a nonconference schedule that will prepare us for our first season in the Horizon League, which is very well respected and has been well represented in postseason play,” added Plitzuweit. “With that in mind, we like the challenges that we will face early on in our season.” —Mike Anderson